The Political Language of Islam. By Bernard Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. 168 pp. Index. Notes. $14.95 cl.

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As the title of this book suggests, the politics of Islam are expressed not only in a distinct vocabulary but a distinct language. The grammar and syntax of political discourse in Islam differ fundamentally from those of other political traditions, and have long complicated outside comprehension of Islam's inner dialogue. Even such widely recognized words as *jihad* and *salam* pose problems of understanding, created by the ways they have been uttered in history, Islamic conceptions of war and peace, and the impact of Western ideas upon Islam. Bernard Lewis has brought the breadth of his learning to bear on the ways Muslims have abstracted politics through words.

Lewis's method is to take these words of politics, past and present, and imbed them in historical context. Across the expanse of Islamic history, different Arabic, Persian, and Turkish terms have designated the political community and the state, rulers and ruled, varieties of wars and rebellions, and allies and enemies of the established order. All these designations rested ultimately on the idea of the Islamic community as God's chosen instrument, an affirmation of faith that lies at the core of the political language of Islam.

While Lewis offers the occasional clue to etymology, his principal concern is establishing what political terms have meant to those who coin them and use them at particular points in time. Political language is part and parcel of political change; wars, conquests, and revolutions enhance some terms and devalue others, so that no term has meaning above historical context. One of the many compelling proofs of this principle is found in Lewis's discussion of the Arabic word for king, *malik*. In early Islam, *malik* "was most commonly used to diminish others rather than to aggrandize oneself." God ruled as king in Islam; the title of *malik* was usually applied by Muslims only to infidel rulers, to accentuate their infidelity. But in the twentieth century, the growing influence of Europe made many Muslim rulers eager to claim the formerly disreputable title of *malik*, and it was adopted even by the puritan Saudis. Yet it is now in decline once again, as Muslim rulers show preference for titles associated with Western or revolutionary democracy, or those identified solely with Islamic tradition. Radical shifts in the meaning and value of political terms, while not unique to Islam, are invaluable evidence for the unique experience of Islam.

It is of course those terms that originate within the Islamic tradition that have caused the most misunderstanding in the West. This is because Muslims were generally reluctant to accord any legitimacy to the gap between Islamic political theory and Muslim political practice — a gap that opened in Islam's first century and eventually became a chasm. Political theory acknowledged only the division between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslims constituted a single political community of men equal before God and subordinate to one sacred law. Rulership was essentially a contractual obligation for the enforcement of that law. In practice, however, the community of Islam quickly divided into rival parties, then rival states, while the absolutism of Muslim rulers often trespassed the bounds of the law.

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While even the autocratic exercise of political power could be sanctioned by Islam, the assimilation of absolute power to any one individual could never be grounded in law and language. The political language of Islam thus had the innate tendency to underrepresent the power that Muslim rulers actually exercised. The term *caliph* first meant no more than successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and the title of sultan had its modest origins in the abstract noun for authority. But the caliphs came to exercise powers wider than any enjoyed by the Prophet himself, and there was nothing abstract about the absolute authority wielded by many who bore the title of sultan. The political language of Islam did not readily accommodate this concentration of power. But, as Lewis demonstrates, neither did it produce a word for political freedom. While Islamic theory withheld absolute political power from the ruler, it also denied inviolable political rights to the ruled; the political language of Islam stigmatized kingship, but never provided a word for citizenship. It enshrined an ideal balance of power hardly ever achieved in the history of Islam. This made it still easier for modern Western concepts to undermine the traditional Islamic concepts of power and its limits, so that even Muslims are no longer fluent in the political language of Islam.

Insightful passages intersect Lewis's path of words. Some illuminate the relationship between natural environment and political metaphor. The metaphors of leadership in Islam evoked horsemanship rather than seamanship; the Muslim ruler was never at the helm, but very much in the stirrup. He did not radiate authority like the sun, for the withering sun of the Middle East is oppressive. Instead he provided beneficent shade for his subjects, representing himself as "the shadow of God upon Earth." Particularly interesting is Lewis's argument that power relationships in Islam were conceived in horizontal rather than vertical terms. In Islam, you were not up or down; you were in or out. "This is a society which always in principle, and often, at least to some extent, in practice, rejects hierarchy and privilege, a society in which power and status depend primarily on nearness to the ruler and the enjoyment of his favor, rather than on birth or rank." One might add that it was the traditional preference of Middle Eastern rulers to distance rather than degrade their critics who were not actually rebels, to send them out into exile rather than cast them down into dungeons. But that is a preference that is dying: modern distances are too short, and revolutions may be launched even from the remote oases of European exile. Many who might once have been political exiles are today political prisoners. Like the terminology of rule, the terminology of opposition no longer draws upon the traditional categories of Islam.

As Lewis's own extensive notes attest, the terms about which he writes have been discussed by historians in scattered sources, and sometimes at length in the solemn columns of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. What this book has done is interpret these sources in a synthesis that spans the breadth of Islamic history, from the Qur'an to Khomeini. Lewis's own style, combining erudition with a simple elegance and subtle humor, continues to inspire. In an era of specialization and narrowing academic vision, he stands alone as one who deserves, without qualification, the title of historian of Islam. ■